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CONVERSION to the WORLD VIEW of ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS: A REFINEMENT of CONVERSION THEORY.

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ABSTRACT: Most empirical studies of the conversion process have focused on individuals who have come to espouse the world view of a deviant religious denomination or sect. Using observational data our research analyzes the conversion process by which individuals come to identify with the ideology propounded by Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.). A.A. provides prospective "alcoholics" with both a solution to drinking problems and an overarching world view with which to reinterpret their past experience. The A.A. conversion process can be divided into six phases: hitting bottom, first stepping, making a commitment, accepting your problem, telling your story, and doing Twelfth Step work. Each of these phases is described in detail. Similarities and differences are noted between the observed A.A. conversion process and the model generally described in the sociological literature on religious conversion. Our analysis indicates certain weaknesses in the process-model explanation of conversion and points to the necessity of taking into account organizational context and situational variables.

Most empirical studies of the conversion process have focused on individuals who have come to espouse the world view of a deviant religious sect (Harrison, 1974b:388; Parrucci, 1968:144; Richardson and Stewart, 1978:25). A theory of the conversion process might be better advanced if sociologists abandoned their near-exclusive concern with these "fringe religions" and studied personal identity transformations in other contexts (e.g., see Bankston et al. 1981; Boyanowski, 1979; Sarbin and Adler, 1970). With this goal in mind we examined the process by which individuals come to identify with the ideology propounded by Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.), a process other researchers (Gellman, 1964; Jones, 1970; Petrunk, 1972) have noted as similar to religious conversion.

Heirech (1977:654) claims that the term "conversion" has a wide range of usages in the religious and social scientific literature. We will use the term to signify "a radical reorganization of identity, meaning and life" (Travisano, 1970:600). We do not use the term "conversion" either to refer to the relatively minor transformations of personal identity the Travisano calls "alterations," or to a change in religious affiliation that might be unaccompanied by a change in perspective. Finally, we do not use the term "conversion" to denote qualitative change in the nature of one's religious commitment (James, 1961),

although such a "conversion experience" often accompanies a radical change from one perspective to another. Thus, our use stresses a major change in identity accompanied by sincere belief.

The process by which individuals affiliate with A.A. entails a radical transformation of personal identity in that A.A. provides the prospective affiliate not merely with a solution to problems related to drinking, but also with an overarching world view with which the "convert" can and must reinterpret his or her past experience. We will describe the process by which individuals come to espouse this new perspective and compare our findings with other research on the conversion process. Our analysis suggests that the central dynamic in the conversion process is coming to accept the opinions of reference others. Our data also suggest that researchers of the conversion should pay more attention to the organizational context in which conversion occurs.

METHODS

The A.A. groups in this study met in an area we shall refer to as Mideastern City. For 16 months the researchers attended at least one meeting a week. We presented ourselves as sociologists concerned with learning about alcoholism and A.A.(1). After five months of observation, we developed enough trust, rapport, and knowledge to gain access to closed meetings (for alcoholics only) of five groups. In addition, we gained access to the A.A. service center, open houses, and the homes of some members. The service center serves as the "formal" organizational hub for the numerous Mideastern City A.A. groups and provides a full-time answering service. The two open houses are large, furnished halls where members gather after meetings or during their spare time to talk about the program or "shoot the breeze." Our data draw heavily on meetings since they are the arena for A.A.'s basic formal activity. Meetings of the Mideastern City A.A. are either "open" or "closed" and are organized as either "speaker meetings" or "discussion meetings." Speaker meetings revolve around the delivery of testimonials in which members "tell their stories." At the conclusion of meetings members gather in small groups to talk about the meeting and "whatever else is going on." In Mideastern City A.A., open meetings tend to be speaker meetings, and closed meetings tend to be discussion meetings.

After attending meetings and observing in other settings as well, we wrote detailed notes and outlines or tape recorded our comments. Notes were typed and tapes transcribed within several days of their collection. Field notes were coded utilizing techniques described by Bogdan (1972), and data were analyzed using procedures developed by other qualitative researchers (Becker, 1958; Bogdan and Taylor, 1975; Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Schwartz and Jacobs, 1979).

The Alcoholics Anonymous Perspective

Founded by Bill W. and Dr. Bob during the late 1930's, A.A. is a self-help program run for and by alcoholics. In addition to sponsoring meetings and other activities, A.A. also owns and staffs

its own publishing company, which produces numerous books, pamphlets, and a monthly journal, The Grapevine. One publication, Alcoholics Anonymous, is referred to by A.A. members as the "Big Book," and serves as the basic text for all A.A. members.

The same simple description of A.A. appears on the first page of The Grapevine every month. According to The Grapevine:

> Alcoholics Anonymous is a fellowship of men and women who share their experience, strength and hope with each other that they may solve their common problem and help others to recover from alcoholism.
>
> The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking. There are no dues or fees for A.A. membership; we are self-supporting through our own contributions. A.A. is not allied with any sect, denomination, politics, organization or institution; does not wish to engage in any controversy, neither endorses nor opposes any causes. Our primary purpose is to stay sober and help other alcoholics to achieve sobriety.

This description also appears in most other A.A. published literature and is read at the start of every meeting. We assume that it depicts the essentials of the A.A. program as members wish outsiders and newcomers to see them. The A.A. program for dealing with alcohol-related problems is codified in the "Twelve Steps" of A.A. All A.A. members are strongly encouraged to use the Twelve Steps to deal with their alcoholism and with life in general (2). These steps comprise a systematic model of the process of "becoming sober" as A.A. sees it. The process begins with the recognition that one has an "unmanageable life" and culminates in the commitment to "carry the message" to others. Interestingly, alcohol is mentioned only once, while God is mentioned six times. The A.A. program has served as a prototype for the development of similar programs to manage smoking, eating, drinking, gambling, drug use, and other behaviors.

A.A. stresses the allergy conception of alcoholism (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1955; Trice and Roman, 1970) which maintains that some individuals are more susceptible to the "progressive disease" of alcoholism than are others. Furthermore, since A.A. suggests that alcoholism cannot be cured but only arrested (3), "slipping" can be prevented only through permanent and continuous involvement in the A.A. program.

Members view the program as providing a specific model for arresting alcoholism, and also as providing a general philosophy of life (see also Robinson, 1979). Members frequently comment that "A.A. is a way of life," "A.A. is a philosophy of living," and "A.A. is a strategy of living that can work for anyone." A testimonial from a female member, recorded in the "Big Book," and an excerpt from an older male's account at an open meeting illustrate A.A.'s philosophy of living.

> A.A. taught me how not to drink. And also on the 24 hour plan, it taught me how to live...I am part of A.A. which is a way of life. If I had not become an active alcoholic and joined A.A. I might never have found my own identity or become a part of anything. (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1955:417)
>
> Being sober is only the first part of A.A. A.A. is a plan for living. That's why so many other people copy our program. A.A. works for almost any

problem. In fact it works even if you don't have a problem. Lots of people could use this program because it teaches you how to live with each other and yourself.

The ideology of A.A. encourages people to redefine their past experiences and to lead a new life radically discontinuous with these past experiences. Accepting these different world views and life styles is the most significant element in conversion.

Becoming a Member of Alcoholics Anonymous

The social psychological process of conversion to A.A. will now be explained. How do individuals come to accept the identity and world view implied by membership in A.A.? Observation reveals that the process consists of six distinct phases: hitting bottom, first stepping, making a commitment, accepting your problem, telling your story, and doing Twelfth Step work. The model represents the typical process in Mideastern City A.A., although some people deviate from it.

Hitting Bottom

Most individuals who eventually affiliate with A.A. describe their initial contact with A.A. as a consequence of "hitting bottom." The phrase "hitting bottom" comes from the "Big Book" and is used by A.A. members to describe the low point in their drinking careers, particularly when this low point coincides with initial affiliation with A.A. The explanation that people come to A.A. because they have "hit bottom" is ideologically prescribed. For this reason, it is difficult to ascertain the extent to which this explanation reflects a retrospective interpretation or actual subjective experience. Whatever the case, it seems logical that when people are profoundly unhappy with their lives, they may seek a perspective that offers a solution to their problems and a place that offers them hope that their situation can improve.

"Hitting bottom" may refer to experiencing an intolerable amount of emotional pain, living on skid row, or finding oneself in a tension-producing situation. It is often associated with a sudden crisis resulting directly or indirectly from drinking. For the drinker, a crisis is a personally-defined intolerable situation.

One speaker at a meeting commented:

> Two terrible events forced me into this program. I had been supporting my drinking by rolling guys in the back streets of X city. One night I nailed this old guy and upon finding he only had 86 cents, I vented my frustration by beating his head against the curb. I think I killed him...A short time later my youngest daughter drowned and I was so drunk that I couldn't even go to the funeral. At this period in my life things were so bad that I just had to do something, so I decided to come to A.A.

The significance of "hitting bottom" before contacting A.A. corresponds to the widely held sociological theory that the convert must experience acute tension or personal difficulties in order to begin the process of conversion (Lofland and Stark, 1965; Lynch, 1978; Richardson et al., 1978, 1979; Richardson and Stewart, 1978).

Some researchers, however, have questioned the importance of tension for the conversion process. Seggar and Kunz (1972:178) conclude that "converts" to Mormonism did not necessarily experience life crisis situations in the years immediately preceding conversion (Austin, 1977:283, questions whether these are true converts). The majority of Heirich's (1977:665) sample of converts to Catholic Pentecostalism had been subjected to stressful situations prior to conversion, but not to a greater statistically significant degree than a "control group" of non-converts. In a study of "converts" to a Christian Fundamental group, Austin (1977:284-285) found that tension seemed to precede conversion only in some cases. Lofland and Stark (1965), who first suggested that tension is a prerequisite to conversion, emphasized that this is a subjective rather than an objective state. In other words, converts to the Divine Precepts did not have worse problems than other individuals but did perceive these problems as serious and unbearable. Carrying this idea a step further, Snow and Phillips (1980:434) argue that what distinguishes converts from nonconverts is not higher levels of tension but a greater tendency to reexamine their biographies in order to find evidence of discontent prior to conversion.

For prospective converts to A.A., "hitting bottom" is subjectively defined. Members openly agree that some people have "higher" bottoms and others "lower" bottoms. Individuals who require hospitalization frequently do not define their condition as "bottom," whereas for others "bottom" consists of seemingly minor problems. One has "hit bottom" when one believes this has happened. How does this recognition of "hitting bottom" occur? How does an individual come to see that change is needed?

Our data suggest that recognition of having "hit bottom" was often "forced" upon the prospective A.A. affiliate by a significant other, a doctor or an employer. Robinson's (1979) research illustrates the frequent involvement of family, A.A. members, and psychiatrists in newcomers' decisions to come to A.A. The following dramatic account of a 26-year-old male illustrates the role of significant others in defining the situation.

> One night after a late drinking bout I got home and the door was locked. I pounded madly at the door and my wife came to the window with our two young children. She was crying and the kids were crying and she was saying, "You're a drunk, a drunk, a drunk - nothing but a drunk, a drunk..." I also started to cry, at first I thought for the kids, but now I realize I was crying for myself because it was the truth. I knew it was true and that I was a drunk. This incident really helped me make the A.A. program; it was a moment of self-realization. Because of it I went to A.A.

Crises most frequently mentioned in our field notes are losing a job or losing a spouse. On some occasions, even the <u>threat</u> of losing a job or a spouse is sufficient to provoke a sense of having "hit bottom" and provide the impetus to try A.A. Indeed, spouses and employers use threats or deprivations as power levers to push individuals to A.A.

Perhaps the subjective nature of "hitting bottom" is best

conveyed through the words of a chairman beginning an open meeting. He said:

Usually chairmen say a few words to qualify themselves but if I started talking we wouldn't have enough time. At any rate, I do qualify. Some people come in here because they lose a job or their wife, or maybe their home. Its usually for one of those reasons. Some people are forced to come here. I came on my own. I didn't lose much of anything. I wasn't forced into coming. I just knew I belonged here. Maybe I was a little different; I don't know. But the important thing to remember is that we are all alike once we get here because we gain sobriety - besides that - it's a good philosophy. Like I said, I didn't lose that much, but I certainly didn't know how to live either. I'm positive on the way of life that this program has to offer. This program can really help anybody.

The evidence presented here suggests that reference others play an important role in persuading prospective converts to contact A.A. By contrast, Lofland and Stark (1965) have argued that a lack of affective bonds outside the recruiting group is a prerequisite to conversion. Converting to the perspective of A.A. seems to utilize affective bonds whereas converting to the perspectives of religious groups, especially those with "deviant" world views, relies on insufficient bonds.

According to Richardson et al., even in deviant religious groups a convert can have a close relationship with an outsider as long as the outsider holds a positive view of the group (1978:48; see Balch and Taylor, 1978:55). Individuals with affective bonds outside the group have typically joined less deviant groups whose perspectives were likely to be seen in a positive light by the prospective converts' reference others (Austin, 1977; Baer, 1978; Greil and Rudy, 1981; Harrison, 1974a; Seggar and Kunz, 1972; Snow and Phillips, 1980). Our data support this more complex view that the extent to which conversion entails an absence or a neutralization of affective bonds with members depends on the reputation of the group.

Although many people do not have a clear idea about what A.A. is or does, most do not see it as deviant. Rather, they view it as a group that offers a "cure" for deviance. It has the status of the logical place to go if one has problems with alcohol. Thus, when an organization is seen in a positive light by a prospective convert's reference others, close ties with individuals outside A.A. may facilitate contact with A.A. These individuals may use the prospective convert's dependence on them as a power resource to force acceptance of their definition that he or she has a problem and that A.A. is the proper place to go in order to solve that problem.

When prospective converts "hit bottom" there are several factors that make their coming to A.A. more or less likely. Individuals are more likely to come to A.A. if other solutions to their problem are not available or have been experienced as unsuccessful. Initial contact and conversion are more likely if prospective converts have friends or relatives in the organization. Personal and group loyalties play an important role in the recruitment process of religious groups as well (Bromley and Shupe, 1979; Eister, 1950; Gerlach and Hine, 1968, 1970; Greil, 1977;

Greil and Rudy, 1981; Harrison, 1974a; Lofland and Stark, 1965; Lofland, 1966; Seggar and Kunz, 1972; Snow and Phillips, 1980; Snow et al., 1980; Stark and Bainbridge, 1980).

Other research on the process of affiliation with A.A. shows that individuals who have had previous experience with informal small groups are more likely to contact A.A. (Hanfmann, 1951; Jackson and Conner, 1953). Finally Trice(1957), in one of the most detailed studies to date on affiliation with A.A., emphasizes that affiliation is contingent on the similarity between the organization's views of the nature of alcoholism and alcoholics, and the views of the perspective affiliate. This notion of overlapping ideology dovetails with the importance attributed to "previous dispositions" in the religious conversion literature (Balch and Taylor, 1978; Griel, 1977; Harrison, 1974a; Heirich, 1977; Lofland, 1966; Lofland and Stark, 1965; Richardson, 1980; Richardson et al., 1978, 1979; Richardson and Stewart, 1978.)

First Stepping

The second phase of conversion to A.A. is "first stepping." First stepping entails making initial contact with A.A., picking up an A.A. guide, and becoming oriented to the A.A. program. Prospective converts approach A.A. in a variety of ways. Individuals learn about the program from relatives, friends, or institutions such as prisons, mental institutions, or hospitals. Prospective converts are likely to call the local A.A. service center or one of the open houses to request personal assistance or ask for meeting information. Since the backbone of the A.A. program involves helping others as a means of maintaining one's own sobriety, members are always on the lookout for new recruits. However, assistance by members is seldom directly given unless it is requested. The Big Book advises that:

> When you discover a prospect for Alcoholics Anonymous, find out all you can about him. If he does not want to stop drinking, don't waste time trying to persuade him. You may spoil a latter opportunity. (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1955:90)

The dominant theme is to be available when someone is ready for help. A.A. works by "attraction" and "retention" and not by "promotion."

Newcomers to A.A. are typically scared and confused, because they do not know what to expect. They have come for a variety of reasons, some on their own volition because they "have reached bottom and there is nowhere else to go," others because they were pushed through the door by employers, friends, or spouses. Most people who show up at A.A. meetings have drinking problems which leave them extremely dependent on alcohol; however, some people show up who have other problems (Rudy, 1978). Other research has shown that the total population of Monopolies A.A. included "... curiosity seekers, non-alcoholic deviants, transients, and other people totally unsuited (sic) for Alcoholics Anonymous" (Bohince and Orensteen, 1953). In Mideastern City A.A. several members claimed that "It wasn't my drinking that brought me here. I just wasn't living right and I needed a new philosophy." Another member

said he was a homosexual and was trying to figure himself out. Even many of those who do drink heavily may not view themselves as "alcoholics" when they first encounter A.A. Our evidence (Rudy, 1978) suggests that most of those who eventually espouse the A.A. ideology do not have an alcoholic self-definition at the time of the initial contact with the organization.

Prospective converts try to discover what an alcoholic is and whether they fit the definition. Newcomers' first days in the program are usually spent attending orientation meetings or being personally oriented by A.A. members. Orientation meetings generally revolve around a brief description of the disease nature of alcoholism as A.A. perceives it and a brief exploration of how the A.A. program works (i.e., Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions). Orientation meetings are often "First Step" meetings, as well. That is, they involve discussions of the importance and meaning of the First Step.

Newcomers are urged to attend A.A. meetings frequently. They typically receive a guide who shows them around various A.A. groups and "open houses." Usually, guides are individuals who make the first contact with newcomers and become their sponsors, if they affiliate and want sponsors. The guide is responsible for introducing the newcomer to A.A. members, taking him or her to and from meetings, and channelling him or her to the most appropriate meetings. The service center and individual members often match guides with newcomers on the basis of gender, age and social class. Matching is also likely because newcomers are sent to groups where they will "fit in" better. Skid row drinkers will be steered toward the Salvation Army Group rather than the middle class or suburban groups.

From the point of view of the organization, the chief function of initial A.A. orientation and guiding is to "qualify" prospective converts, i.e., to get converts to recognize that they do, in fact, belong at A.A. It must be emphasized that virtually all who come are viewed as potentially qualified for the program. Newcomers are encouraged to listen in the hope that they will identify with the guide or with another A.A. member. If newcomers express any interest they are usually given a copy of the "Big Book" or some other A.A. literature (4). As the name of this stage suggests, members try to make newcomers recognize that their lives are unmanageable and that they are powerless over alcohol. Specific comments that members have utilized to convince newcomers they belong include the following:

Any drinking can be a problem. All you have to do to be an alcoholic is drink.

Only alcoholics come to these meetings. You have been coming to these meetings, and therefore you must be an alcoholic.

If you want to stop drinking you can be a member. It doesn't matter if you drank a lot or not. All you have to do is desire to stop drinking.

Some of us didn't drink much at all. It just seemed that when we did, we got into trouble.

The newcomer is pressured to accept the label of alcoholic because A.A. maintains that successful treatment depends on acknowledging one's problem. Chairpersons of A.A. meetings and A.A. testimonial speakers speak in ways that will help individuals qualify as "alcoholics." One comment made at a closed meeting stands out:

If there are any new people here tonight, I hope that you learned something. If you think you have a problem or if you think you are an alcoholic, I assure you that you are. You wouldn't be thinking about it and you wouldn't be here if you weren't an alcoholic.

Moderate drinkers, individuals with "problems in living," one of the present authors, as well as "serious" drinkers have qualified for the alcoholic role. On several occasions members commented to one of the present authors that they have known other researchers who were A.A. members, implying that some individuals come but hide their alcoholism.

During first stepping members try to find out as much as possible about newcomers and provide them with personal attention, support, and acceptance. The effort to deal personally with newcomers frequently pays off. Since newcomers are uncertain about what A.A. is and often expect to find an organization composed of "skid row bums," they are quite often favourably impressed by the warm atmosphere they encounter at A.A. They are made to feel that they are among friends and that A.A. members are the kind of people "who would do anything for you."

Intensive interaction and the formation of close personal ties within the group seems to us to be essential to the conversion process. Lofland (1978) has described the "hooking" techniques of a group whose success in proselytization seems to stem, at least in part, from the self-conscious manipulation of a "loving" atmosphere. Various passages found in the "Big Book" suggest that members of A.A. are also consciously aware that the personal, informal, accepting approach may enhance their success in recruiting new members:

When you discover a prospect for Alcoholics Anonymous, find out all you can about him (90).

Get an idea of his behavior, his problems, his background, the seriousness of his condition, and his religious leanings (90).

Call on him when he is still jittery. He may be more receptive when depressed (91).

See your man alone, if possible...Tell him enough about your drinking habits, symptoms, and experiences to encourage him to speak of himself (91).

We suspect that newcomers themselves are often aware of the role that the personal approach plays in building up loyalties to A.A. At open meetings one sometimes sees individuals who arrive after the speaker has begun to talk and who leave as soon as he or she has finished speaking. It is virtually impossible to contact

these individuals in order to discuss their motives for attending in this way, but the pattern of coming in late and leaving early may be a strategy employed by individuals who wish to "check out" the organization without running the risk of "getting hooked." (See Straus, 1976, 1979, for the descriptions of the conversion process that emphasize the tactics employed by seekers rather than those employed by organizations and groups trying to attract converts.)

Making a Commitment

As soon as oldtimers begin to think that an individual is qualified for and genuinely interested in A.A., pressure is exerted on the newcomer to "make a commitment." The pressure is exerted at two levels behavioral and ideological.

The pressure to make a behavioral commitment to A.A. represents an attempt on the part of the organization to provide prospective converts on the part of the organization to provide prospective converts with a sense of responsibility and purpose. Newcomers might be asked to show up at meetings a little early, to set up chairs for meetings, to empty ash trays, or to help make coffee. Performing these minor duties allows the newcomer to feel needed and to experience a sense of contribution or responsibility. These responsibilities are usually given to those prospective members who have lost most of their other responsibilities and have experienced a loss of control over their lives. A middle-aged male's testimonial illustrates this point:

When I first came to the Westside Group I was in bad shape. I was screwed up physically, spiritually and mentally...I had lost my job and my wife and everything...That first night though they asked me to help set up the chairs and the next week I came early because they asked me to help again with setting up the chairs and passing out ashtrays. Now in the program I do everything that is asked of me. Doing those simple things helped me - it put me on the road back.

Performance of such simple tasks may function as "side bets" (Becker, 1960). Once prospective converts have invested some energy in the daily operation of the organization, they have more to lose if they decide not to affiliate with A.A. The more time and energy spent, the more it will be seen as "wasted" should prospective converts decide not to affiliate. Many organizations require new members to give up something as the price of membership. Kanter (1972:76) suggests that once individuals have sacrificed something of value, they may be more highly motivated to continue their involvement with an organization. Prospective converts to the perspective of A.A. have not given the organization their worldly goods, but they have invested some time and energy and these may function in a similar way.

At the ideological level, oldtimers try to develop converts' commitment to the organization's beliefs and values, specifically the Twelve Steps and the Twelve Traditions. Guides and other members begin to ask newcomers to study and know the program. Newcomers are expected to attend meetings and to work at "not taking the first drink a day at a time." In addition they are invited and expected to "hang around" with members after meetings

and to go to the open house for hours of informal discussion regarding A.A., its ideology and its members.

When guides and members sense that newcomers are interested, they frequently ask them to "take the program seriously" by challenging them with the "90/90 rule," i.e., to attend 90 meetings in 90 days. The 90/90 rule" is viewed as a test of the newcomers' seriousness but since it also enhances the likelihood of sobriety it similarly increases the chances of conversion. Lofland's (1978) term "encapsulation" describes the process by which members of the Divine Precepts prevent prospective converts from interacting with any reference others who might discredit the world view to which the prospective convert is being exposed. In the Divine Precepts case, encapsulation is achieved primarily through physical segregation. Physical segregation for ideological encapsulation has been found to characterize conversion, "brainwashing" and "deprogramming" (Harder et al., 1972; Lifton, 1963; Patrick and Dulack, 1976; Schein, 1961; Shupe et al., 1977). Affiliation with A.A. does not involve physical segregation. Prospective converts are not asked to give up their friends, their families or their jobs. But the "90/90 rule" serves as the functional equivalent to physical segregation because people who go to 90 meetings in 90 days do not have much time to hang around with their drinking buddies.

The "90/90 rule" minimizes the distraction of prospective converts by competing organizations or perspectives. Similarly, A.A.'s satellite organizations, such as Al-Anon (an organization for close relatives of alcoholics) insure that significant others are supportive. By contrast, students of conversion to other groups have sometimes noted that proselytizing groups may encourage prospective converts to sever or attenuate ties to significant others who are not involved in the group. Satellite organizations like Al-Anon function to unite the prospective converts' new reference group with previous groups by initiating their significant others into the A.A. world view (Lofland, 1969).

Sometimes during the "making a commitment" stage, newcomers are challenged or quizzed about the program. Failure elicits suggestions and demands to "get serious," to be honest with yourself," and "to learn to work the program." It must be emphasized that the conversion process described to date is informal and unstructured. Most pressure for personal change occurs within the context of informal discussions. These discussions occur before and after meetings, at the open houses and at members' homes; they involve detailed elaboration of members' experiences as active A.A. members. These experiences are always explained in terms of the Twelve Steps and the Twelve Traditions or in terms of other aspects of A.A. ideology.

Another process that occurs within the "making a commitment" phase involves the awarding of various coloured chips representing different levels of sobriety. In Midwestern City, this usually occurs at closed meetings. Chips are given to mark short as well as long periods of sobriety. The applause and praise following the awarding of "one-month chips" provides the newcomer with a tangible reward and yet another reason to continue coming to A.A. These rewards may also function as side bets (Becker, 1960) and may be as

significant in conversion as the ideological positions of the organization themselves. The individual whose sobriety has been publicly acknowledged and applauded may be unwilling to risk the humiliation that might come from "slipping" or from breaking off contact with the organization.

Accepting Your Problem

As individuals become committed to the perspectives and activities of A.A. they are pressed to admit their "problem" and accept an alcoholic identity. In "first stepping" newcomers were "qualified" but in accepting their problem they verbally admit their alcoholism by saying, My name is_____and I'm an alcoholic." All members use this or a similar introduction before giving testimonials and before speaking at discussion meetings. Newcomers sometimes qualify their statements by saying that they think they might be alcoholics or by saying that they aren't sure. The public admission that one is an alcoholic is quite difficult and A.A. members press the individual to make this admission. For example:

Q. How long were you (20 year old male in the program for five months), in the program before you admitted to yourself that you were an alcoholic?

A. That really bothered me at first. I think it probably took about nine weeks. I don't think I wanted to admit it because I knew the truth would set me free. The truth was alright for some people but not for me. It hurt.

Q. What do you mean?

A. I think I was always hiding behind this phony self. I was always excused from whatever it was that I did wrong because it wasn't my fault. I think accepting my alcoholism was like accepting myself.

This respondent went on to say that accepting his identity as an alcoholic really helped him "work the program" and "gain his sobriety."

Some A.A. members initially mimic the phrase "I am an alcoholic," and don't fully accept the identity until later in their careers. One 45-year-old male related that.

I was simply parroting that I was an alcoholic until after about six weeks of going to A.A. I went out and got really drunk. Then I knew that I really was an alcoholic.

Once this identity transformation occurs the individual is well on his way to full conversion. During this phase the converts begin to work hard on the Twelve Steps, placing particular emphasis on making amends for past harms and on "taking moral inventories." Inventory taking is completed by the convert himself (Step 4) and later shared with a clergy person, another member, a close friend or relative (Step 5). The most frequently mentioned character flaw discovered in inventory taking is resentment.

[Resentment]...destroys more alcoholics than anything else. From it stem all forms of spiritual disease for we have been not only mentally and physically ill, we have been spiritually sick. When the spiritual malady is overcome, we straighten out physically and mentally. In dealing with resentments, we set them on paper. (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1955:64)

A conversation with a young male member of six months indicates the importance of resentments:

Q. It's good to see you; how are things going?

A. I'm still hanging on a "day at a time" and its getting better. I took inventory last week.

Q. Was that helpful?

A. Well, it's tough to open yourself up and it was really draining, but it helped I knew I had a lot of resentments; I still do. I can't face all of them yet but I'm going to do my best. I can't face all of myself yet. It's like having a resentment of me.

After self-appraisal the converts are encouraged to share their shortcomings with God and with "another human being." According to the "Big Book":

If we skip this vital step, we may not overcome drinking. Time after time newcomers have tried to keep to themselves certain facts about their lives. Trying to avoid this humbling experience, they have turned to easier methods. Almost invariably they got drunk. Having persevered with the rest of the program, they wondered why they fell. We think the reason is that they never completed their housecleaning. They took inventory all right, but hung on to some of the worst items in stock. They only thought they had lost their egoism and fear; they only thought they had humbled themselves. But they had not learned enough of humility, fearlessness and honesty, in the sense we find it necessary, until they told someone else all their story. (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1955:72-73)

Encouraging the prospective convert to share his or her moral inventory is an instance of the commitment mechanism of "mortification" (Kanter, 1972:103). In mortification, individuals accept their subordination to the group and confirm their willingness to be judged according to the standards of the group. In acknowledging their character flaws in the presence of others, prospective converts demonstrate their ability and willingness to see and judge themselves from the perspective of A.A. ideology.

Another activity that occurs during this phase is the selection of a sponsor. Only a few A.A. members do not select a sponsor. Sponsors become advisors in all matters concerning the program and the convert's private life. The selection of a sponsor is viewed as an important event and the convert is not pushed into a choice. When members tell their stories at meetings they frequently mention their sponsors by name and explain the sponsor's help in gaining sobriety. Converts frequently choose their guides as sponsors.

Telling Your Story or Giving Testimonial

The convert's next stop is to affirm publicly much of what has transpired in the past four stages. Storytelling formally occurs at most open meetings and many closed meetings. It also frequently occurs informally at discussion meetings and in conversations. The testimonial is made up of two parts: a story about how bad it was before A.A. and a story about how good it is now. A.A. members frequently refer to the drinking part of the testimonial as a "drunkalogue" and to the second part as a "sobriety story." Students of conversion and commitment have sometimes pointed to the importance of a "commitment act" that symbolizes the initiate's incorporation into the group (Gerlach and Hine, 1968; Harrison, 1974b; Hine, 1970; Toch, 1965; Wilson, 1978). While speaking in tongues or being baptized in the Holy Spirit may be the "bridge-burning act" for members of the Pentecostal movement (Hine, 1970), in A.A. one acknowledges one's new identity as an alcoholic by telling one's story. Newcomers await their first testimonial with trepidation. First storytellers tend to be better dressed than usual. Friends and sponsors first suggest when newcomers should tell their stories and they suggest what should be told and how it should be told. After telling their story for the first time, newcomers are warmly applauded and congratulated by their friends. There is no specific timetable for first storytelling but three or four months after initial contact is the earliest we observed.

Doing Twelfth Step Work

"Carrying the message" or doing "Twelfth Step Work" is the final phase of the conversion process. According to A.A. ideology, an alcoholic is never cured. Sobriety depends on remaining active in A.A. and doing Twelfth Step work. The "Big Book" describes the benefits of Twelfth Step work for those who have gained their sobriety and suggests the most effective methods to employ in Twelfth Step work. For example:

> Helping others is the foundation stone of your recovery. A kindly act once in a while isn't enough. You have to act the Good Samaritan every day, if need be.(p.97)

A discussion with a 40-year-old female at the open house points out the importance of Twelfth Step work.

Q. What types of things do you do around the program?

A. I'm pretty active. I try to help out wherever I can.

Q. Do you speak a lot?

A. No, not really, I guess I do a lot of Twelfth Step Work. It helps me out a great deal. I get to share my experience, strength and hope with others and I get reminded about what I was like when I was drinking.

Q. Isn't Twelfth Step Work hard?

A. Sometimes you get some tough cases - people in bad shape or people who aren't ready for A.A., but helping others is the whole program. You can't work the program unless you help others. Like I said I try to do everything around here that I'm asked to do.

Twelfth Step work also involves meeting all demands that might be faced in spreading the word and strengthening the organization. Providing lodging and transportation, finding jobs, assisting in divorces - virtually everything - is asked and expected of members.

Lofland and Stark (1965) have noted the importance of intensive interaction within the group if one is to become a "total convert." Organization activities enable converts to maintain and renew their sense of commitment to the goals of the organization. By doing Twelfth Step work, members of A.A. continually act out their new self-concepts. By working for the organization individuals have completed an identity transformation. They have become individuals whose sense of self and sobriety are contingent upon the organization. This idea is recognized in A.A.'s "first tradition": "Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon A.A. unity."

Conclusions

The process of becoming a member of A.A. is similar in some respects to the majority of cases described in the religious conversion literature. First, affective bonds within the group and intensive interaction with group members are necessary. Second, the likelihood is reduced that the prospective convert will interact with reference others who do not share the group's perspective. Third, the organization stresses the homogeneity of members vis a vis the ideology (i.e., to be accepted by others, one must respond to demands to "get serious" and view one's problem from the perspective that members of A.A. employ). Fourth, concrete acts of commitment strengthen the loyalty of the perspective convert to the group. Nevertheless, the process of conversion to the perspective of A.A. does not seem to be adequately described by the widely accepted model of Lofland and Stark:

> For conversion, a person must (1) experience enduring, acutely felt tensions, (2) within a religious problem solving perspective, (3) which leads him to define himself as a religious seeker, (4) encountering the (cult) at a turning point in his life, (5) wherein an affective bond is formed (or preexists) with one or more converts, (6) where extra-cult attachments are absent or neutralized, and (7) where if he is to become a deployable agent, he is exposed to intensive interaction. (1965:874)

Not all potential A.A. converts experienced acutely felt tension. Few had defined themselves as seekers on a quest for meaning. In a number of cases, extra-cult attachments were not so much neutralized as they were mobilized to serve the purposes of the organization.

The setting in which conversion to the perspective of A.A. takes place is more "open" than the setting in which conversion to the perspectives of the Divine Precepts Movement takes place. The potential A.A. member is not physically and socially removed from the "outside world" to the same extent that a prospective D.P. might be. Prospective A.A. members continue to perform their occupational, family, and other roles in much the same manner as they performed them before contact with the organization.)For descriptions of similar conversion settings, see Balch and Taylor, 1978; Harrison, 1974a, 1974b; Snow and Phillips, 1980; Lynch, 1978). Mechanisms for maintaining commitment must therefore be different in A.A. from those employed by the D.P.

Furthermore, unlike the world view of the Divine Precepts movement, the A.A. belief system does not depart in a radical way from "mainstream" norms and values (Trice and Roman, 1970) and would probably not be viewed as deviant by participants of "mainstream" culture if they were aware of it. The convert to the perspective of A.A. is not moving from a "respectable" to a "nonrespectable" identity; rather, here it is the opposite. Becoming a member of A.A. does not involve severing ties with reference others in order to embrace a deviant identity. Instead, it involves acquiescing to the demands of reference others that one embrace an identity more in conformity with "mainstream values." Neutralization of extra-group ties may be more necessary for groups publicly defined as deviant than for groups not so defined. Other research we have conducted (Greil and Rudy, 1981) supports this contention.

Finally, it appears to us that contact with A.A. is more likely to be accompanied by a greater degree of coercion than seems to be the case in the Divine Precepts movement and in most cases of religious conversion. The fact that initial contact is less a matter of individual choice in A.A. may dull the importance of seekership in the conversion process.

Other researchers have discovered cases of conversion that do not fit the Lofland and Stark model (Austin, 1977; Balch and Taylor, 1978; Heirich, 1977; Seggar and Kunz, 1972; Snow and Phillips, 1980). Some researchers have modified the model to make it more generally applicable (Austin, 1977; Bankston et al., 1981). We feel, however, that to try to make this model more general is to move in the wrong direction. There can be no single model to describe conversion to all perspectives in all social situations. Lofland himself has complained that too many researchers have tried to apply his model to the conversion setting they were studying rather than develop their own qualitative process models of conversion (1978:21). The Lofland and Stark model seems to describe accurately the religious conversion process as it occurs in one organizational context, although not necessarily in others. Snow and Phillips (1980:431) and Baer (1978:293) have pointed to the need to study the conversion process as it occurs in different types of organizations.

Lofland and Stark have written that, in the final analysis, conversion is the process of "coming to accept the opinions of one's friends" (1965:871). Our evidence suggests to us that the crucial dynamic of conversion is the process of coming to see

oneself and the world as one's reference group sees one. There are many different paths by which individuals eventually accept the opinions of new friends or the new opinions of old friends. In some cases, individuals actively seek a new perspective; in other cases a new perspective appears fortuitously. Sometimes the new perspective conflicts with the perspectives of one's reference others; sometimes it doesn't Sometimes the conversion process involves a certain amount of coercion; sometimes it is voluntary. Sometimes the setting in which conversion takes place is relatively closed off from the outside world; in other cases, the border between the conversion setting and its environment is not so well guarded.

Given these variations there is probably no single conversion process and therefore we should direct our attention to uncovering the disparities among the situations and variables that condition the conversion process. What kinds of situations help to discredit old perspectives? What kinds of situations facilitate change in reference groups? What difference does it make whether the conversion setting is open or closed? What difference does it make whether change is voluntary or involuntary? This new research orientation may be more fruitful than simply seeking a fit between theory and situations.

Perhaps this change in the questions we ask about the conversion process will free the study of identity change of the "passivist" bias that Straus (1976, 1979) and Lofland (1978:22) have noted exists within this research tradition. The process model approach assumes a certain number of set stages through which the social actor is obliged to pass on the road to conversion. To focus on the various organizational contexts in which conversion takes place would allow us to look at conversion as the act of active problem solving.

We also suggest that instead of focusing narrowly on conversion to "fringe religions," a variety of conversion settings should be studied. This would entail broadening the concept of conversion to cover all cases of radical change in personal identity or perspective, and it would entail the examination of all settings in which such radical change takes place. Finally, students of the conversion process can benefit from research in other subdisciplines of sociology that deal with processes of personal change, particularly "brainwashing," socialization, resocialization, "disaffection," rehabilitation, deviance, "prisonization," social movements, occupational change, and behavior modification (Parrucci, 1968:145; Richardson, 1978:8).

Reference Notes

1. The data reported in this article were collected by David Rudy.

2. The Twelve Steps as developed by Bill W. and some of the other founders are:
   1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol...that our lives had become unmanageable.
   2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understand Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these Steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

3. Weight loss programs and other self-help organizations tend to share this view of the permanence of the actor's condition or stigma (Laslett and Warren, 1975).
4. Frequently, a brief pamphlet and questionnaire entitled "Is A.A. for you?" is given to the newcomer.

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